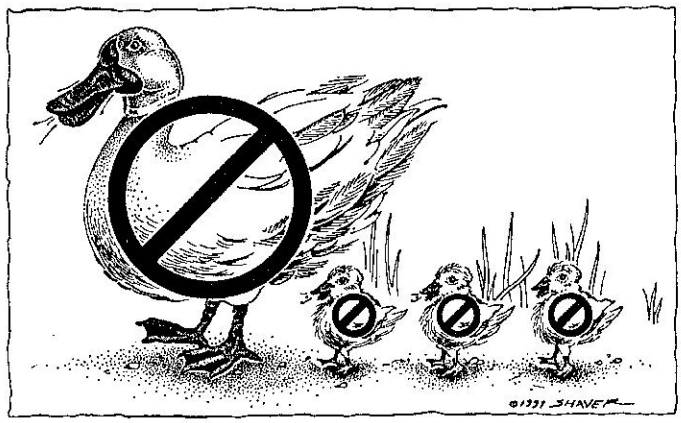
Answering the Quack Busters

I have to warn you—this column is going to raise more questions than it answers and identify more problems than solutions. I hope it will spark discussion, debate and some well thought out positions on just how we view health fraud and quackery in general, and in our profession in particular.

The subject of *quackery* is as important as the issue of scope of practice in massage therapy because of the potential that those wishing to limit our practices can use it to defame us. We are particularly vulnerable because of our historical and current association with non-traditional and alternative health practices.



The issue of quackery and our vulnerability was brought home to me at the Minneapolis Conference in May. While in Minneapolis, I visited the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices, known as the "quack museum" for short. I had fun looking at some bizarre medical devices and even got a phrenology reading (the shape of my head mapped). While it was historically interesting, it made me uneasy to see a vibration chair from the Kellogg Battlecreek Sanitarium there. There were other things in the exhibit such as a head massager and color therapy machine which might be found in any AMTA conference exhibit hall. In my opinion, the museum mixed up obvious quackery with outmoded medical treatments, curious machines, and legitimate albeit alternative health measures.

My queasy feelings were confirmed when I picked up a pamphlet from the National Council Against Health Fraud. They defined health fraud/quacks as the "promotion, for financial gain, of fraudulent or unproven devices, treatments, services, plans or products... that alter or claim to alter the human condition." That is a very broad statement that leaves many in our profession open to accusations of fraud and quackery.

In a handout available at the storefront museum, quacks were described as taking a pseudo-scientific posture, using esoteric devices for diagnosis and treatment, claiming cures in areas where scientific medicine is yet highly ineffective. It also says that quacks stress personal contact, express compassion and sympathy, tailor their approach to individual needs, offer a viable alternative to hopelessness, and use miracle drugs and devices.

The handout calls quacks anti-establishment types who take a medical underdog posture. It says they stress the shortcomings of scientific medicine, are disassociated from the mainstream, and claim to possess innate skills. They promise quick symptomatic relief and cure, admit no limitations to therapeutic effectiveness, and rely heavily on the self-limited nature of most diseases.

While that description does not fit the typical massage therapist 100%, there are aspects of it that do ring true in some cases. Is there anything valid in that description? How do we measure up to it as a group.

As we become more visible as a profession through the growing popularity of massage therapy/bodywork and the advent of National Certification, we become prime targets for people and groups like the "quack busters" described in the *Vegetarian Times* (August 1991). In the subtitle to her article, "The Health Fraud Cops," author Sharon Bloyd-Peshkin asks "Are the quack busters consumer advocates or medical McCarthyites?" I recommend that you read the article and make your own judgment.

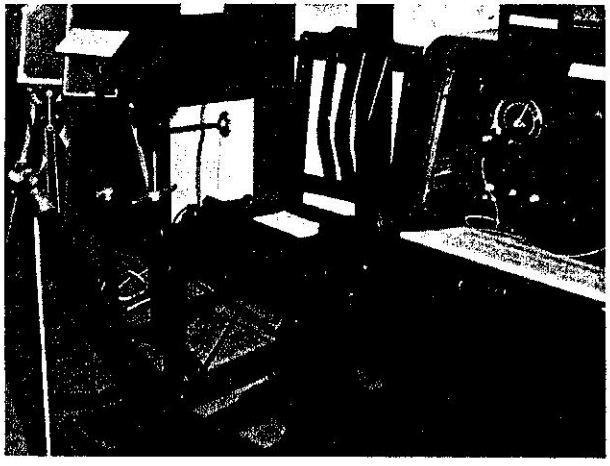
From its beginning in 1943 as the American Association of Masseurs and Masseuses, the AMTA has championed high standards in the field of massage therapy. At the same time, the AMTA has acted as a forum for non-traditional forms of massage therapy and innovative ideas in natural health care. Throughout our 48-year history, we have been open to many concepts abandoned, rejected or ridiculed by regular medicine and health authorities. We have recently allied ourselves with organizations representing alternative, non-traditional approaches to massage therapy/bodywork.

Our openness is part of our unique identity as an association and one of its major strengths. However, it does leave us vulnerable to attack from those who see us, and all alternative health practices, as suspect.

And it isn't enough just to point out the shortcomings of regular medicine and health practices, although that may play a part in an explanation. Focusing on someone else's shortcomings does not directly address the questions about our own profession.

REPORT FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

Are we prepared to answer questions about non-traditional massage therapy and alternative health practices? What do we say to the use by many massage practitioners of adjunct therapies that fall outside of current "scientific" beliefs? How do we explain our acceptance of disciplines that have theoretical bases outside of current Western medical thought? When do we suspend the demand for "scientific" proof? Where do we draw the line between quackery and unproved but plausible theory? Between science, pseudo-science and science at the cutting edge?



Display at the Museum of Questionable Medical Devices in Minneapolis: Vibration chair from the Kellogg Battlecreek Sanitarium.

I believe that there are sound and rational arguments for the acceptance of alternative health practices, theoretical frameworks outside of our own Western experience, and as yet scientifically unproven phenomena. There is also the prospect that we as a profession choose to accept a different paradigm for understanding our world and our work. A fascinating book by Fritjof Capra, T*he Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture* (1982) addresses this issue.

A more practical approach is found in Tompkins and Bird's book, *The Secret Life of Plants* (1973). The authors make the observation that engineers are more concerned with whether something works than pure research which wants to know how or why something works. They observe that "this attitude frees them from the shackles of theory, which in the history of science has often caused pedants to disregard the brilliant new findings of geniuses because there was no theoretical basis to support them." (p. 193) Are we more like engineers? What place does theory have in our work? And what distinguishes the misunderstood genius from a misguided or naive practitioner?

The challenge is here today for individuals, schools and professional massage therapy/bodywork associations to tackle the important (and fascinating) issue of legitimate vs. questionable practices. Or is it mainstream vs. innovative?

How would you answer the "quack busters"?

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